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AUTHOR Cross, Theodore P.; Saxe, Leonard
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ABSTRACT

The psychological effects on viewers of the television film "The Day After," designed to dramatize the possibility of nuclear war and its horrible consequences, were examined by this study. Subjects were 435 residents of the Boston metropolitan area who were randomly sampled from area telephone directories and interviewed by telephone. It appears that "The Day After" accomplished its implicit goals in terms of its effects on viewers' awareness and emotions. Results showed that the film raised viewers' estimate of the likelihood of nuclear war and lowered their estimate of the likelihood of surviving one, stimulated them to think more about the issue of nuclear war, and moved them to be more upset about nuclear war after watching the film. Psychologists need to research with more extensive designs the effect of television films both on viewers' beliefs and reactions and on their actions on issues. (RM)

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The Day After: Report of a Survey of Effects of Viewing and Beliefs About Nuclear War

Theodore P. Cross and Leonard Saxe

Boston University

The 1983 ABC television film The Day After was designed to dramatize the possibility of nuclear war and its horrible consequences. The program was seen by an estimated 95 million viewers (American Broadcasting Company, personal communication, July 19, 1984) and both its development and presentation generated controversy and concern. Underlying concern about the film were a number of important questions about its psychological effects. Did it lead to greater awareness of and belief in the danger of nuclear war or did viewers react with disbelief and denial of the danger? Did those who watched the film already have greater concern about the issue and belief in the danger? If so, did the film add to their awareness and concern?

Questions about the film's psychological effects are important to answer not only to assess the influence of The Day After, but because such mass media treatments of war and peace have the potential to influence our future. The awesome and threatening nature of nuclear war makes it difficult to communicate about, but of course heightens the need for an informed populace. Both because of psychology's special contribution to the study of mass communication, social influence

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and belief formation, and because of psychology's commitment to furthering the cause of peace, films like The Day After merit careful study.

The film made no explicit recommendation for action, did not discuss the question of whether citizens could help prevent nuclear war, and did not take an explicit political stand. Nevertheless, much debate preceded the film in which both conservative and liberal commentators and activists suggested that the film could sway viewers politically (Waters, November 21, 1983). Both fear and hope were expressed that the film would encourage political activism. The nature of the film's influence on viewers' belief in the efficacy both of U.S. foreign policy and of their own efforts in helping prevent a nuclear war were, thus, of interest in assessing psychological impact.

It was also suggested that the film would have substantial "emotional" impact. Prior to The Day After's showing, there was widespread fear that its presentation might lead to overwhelming emotional reactions (Waters, November 21, 1983). Adults were warned not to watch the film alone and were advised to be especially cautious in allowing children to view the film.

There were, thus, a number of possible reactions to the film that were important to assess: viewers' emotional responses, their consciousness of the issue, their estimate of the threat of nuclear war. The central question seemed to be whether watching a dramatized film of nuclear holocaust leads to fright and despair, increased consciousness or denial. Although these reactions are

not necessarily independent, they capture the range of reactions that might be generated by a film about nuclear war. Our initial hypothesis was that adult viewers who chose to watch the film would be more likely to think about nuclear war than be merely frightened or need to deny what they saw.

A relationship between viewing the program and a viewer's beliefs about and reaction to the issue of the nuclear threat is likely to stem from two sources: (a) the effect of the film and (b) the self-selection involved in choosing to watch the film. Individuals who chose to view the film may already have believed that the danger of nuclear war was great and only confirmed their beliefs by watching the film. In a study of the television film, Roots, Ball-Rokeach, Grube and Rokeach (1981) found that self-selection in watching the film accounted for the difference between viewers and non-viewers. Understanding the effect of a film must be tempered by an understanding of who chooses to see the film.

Method

Subjects. 435 residents of the Boston metropolitan area were randomly sampled from area telephone directories and interviewed by telephone. Of the sample, 276 (63%) had seen some or all of the film, while 159 (36%) had not seen the film. According to ratings provided by the local ABC affiliate, 53% of television-owning households in the Boston area watched the film (WCVB-TV, Boston, personal communication, August 1, 1984). The difference between the percentages is probably due to the fact

that our sample was limited to people at home from 5 to 9 p.m., who are likely to be more frequent television viewers. Of this sample, 35 did not give the interviewer any more information than whether or not they had watched the film, 31 of them being non-viewers of the film. Women made up 58% of the sample and men 42%. The mean age of the sample was 39 and the mean level of education was "some years of post-secondary education".

Procedure. Interviewers were 21 undergraduate students in two social psychology courses at Boston University. The number of subjects interviewed by each interviewer varied, but averaged 21. Subjects were called in the evenings during the 10 days following the film. Each interview required approximately ten minutes. Most items in the survey used a 4-point Likert scale. Subjects were asked to rate how much they thought about the issue of nuclear war, how likely they judged it to occur, and how likely it was that they would survive. They were also asked how much the issue upset them, how much they felt they could help prevent a nuclear war, and how much they felt U. S. foreign policy was affecting the threat of nuclear war.

To examine the confound of self-selection in watching the program, viewers were asked to rate their beliefs as they were before viewing the program and as they were after viewing the program. If the film had the intended effect, viewers' ratings of how great they believed the threat to be after viewing the film should have been significantly greater than non-viewers' ratings. If self-selection produced a population of viewers who were

especially aware and concerned even prior to the film, viewers' ratings of their beliefs before viewing the film should also have been greater than ratings of non-viewers. If both the film and self-selection had an effect, the ratings of the beliefs of viewers after the film should have been significantly greater than their ratings of their beliefs before the film, which in turn would have been significantly greater than non-viewers' ratings.

Results

Before turning to the primary question of the effect of viewing The Day After, it was necessary to assess whether the interviews adequately measured this effect. One possible problem, the effect on the dependent variables of using different interviewers, was examined through an analysis of variance. Which interviewer conducted the survey had a significant effect on four of the six dependent variables: ratings of the likelihood of nuclear war ($p < .01$), the likelihood of surviving a nuclear war ($p < .01$), how much nuclear war upset the subject ($p < .05$), and how much subjects felt they could help prevent nuclear war ($p < .01$). However, post-hoc comparisons of means using (Tukey's studentized range test) found that for each of these four dependent variables only one or two interviewers were significantly different from the others. Systematic differences between interviewers, therefore, did not appear to be an important factor to rule out in subsequent analyses.

One concern about the film prior to its presentation was that the increased awareness about nuclear war would be

overwhelming to large numbers of viewers, but this does not seem to have been borne out by the data. On average, those who watched the film reported being somewhere between "a little upset" and "somewhat upset" about nuclear war. Among viewers of the entire film, 28% reported being "very upset" while this dropped to 24% among viewers of part of the film.

In the analysis of the effect of watching none, some or all of the film, watching the film was positively related to ratings on the following variables: how much subjects thought about nuclear war, how likely they thought it to be, how upsetting it was, and how much they thought that U.S. foreign policy was increasing the threat of nuclear war (see Table 1). In initial analyses, a significant effect of watching the film was not found on how much subjects felt they could help prevent a nuclear war; in a separate analysis, which controlled for interviewer effect, this emerged as a significant ($p < .05$). However, the only difference in group means in this case was that viewers who watched part of the program rated this item lower than did non-viewers and viewers who watched the entire program. Watching the film was significantly negatively related to ratings of likelihood of surviving a nuclear war.

To examine the possibility of self-selection in the group of viewers, viewers' ratings of their awareness and belief in the threat as they were before the film were compared with non-viewers' ratings. Viewers' before ratings were also significantly different from the non-viewers' on all the same

variables and in the same direction as the after ratings: amount thought about the issue, believed likelihood of a nuclear war and of surviving one, degree of upset, and believed effect of U.S. foreign policy on decreasing/increasing the threat.

There was, however, a greater difference between the viewers' after ratings and the non-viewers' ratings than between viewers' before ratings and the non-viewers' ratings on three of these four variables. Viewers' ratings of their beliefs after viewing the film were significantly greater ($p<.001$) than their ratings of their beliefs as they were before viewing the film on the following variables: amount thought about the issue, believed likelihood of a nuclear war and of surviving one, and degree of upset. Viewers' "before" ratings of the effect of U.S. foreign policy on decreasing/increasing the threat were not significantly different from their "after" ratings.

Discussion

It appears as if The Day After accomplished its implicit goals in terms of its effects on viewers' awareness and emotions. The film presented relatively graphically and accurately what would happen to individual Americans in a nuclear exchange and thereby, it appears from viewers' reports, raised viewers' estimate of the likelihood of nuclear war and lowered their estimate of the likelihood of surviving one, stimulated them to think more about the issue of nuclear war, and moved them to be more upset about it after watching the film.

After seeing the film, viewers also reported to a greater degree that they thought current U.S. foreign policy was increasing the threat of nuclear war. However, since their rating of this belief as it was before viewing the film did not differ significantly from their ratings of their belief after viewing the film, this effect may be entirely attributable to self-selection. As was the espoused intent of its creators, The Day After may not have exerted any political influence, although our one rather broad question about policy may not have been sensitive enough or specific enough to detect an effect.

The effect of the film on viewers' felt ability to help prevent a nuclear war is unclear, since the only significant result is lower ratings for partial viewers. Perhaps this relationship reflects a type of overall disengagement for these viewers', but there is no other evidence to support this hypothesis.

The significant differences between viewers' ratings of their beliefs before viewing the film with their beliefs after viewing the film suggests that there was a combined effect of self-selection and the film on being aware of and believing in the nuclear threat. This contrasts with research on Roots: The Next Generation (Ball-Rokeach, et. al, 1981). The effect we measured was based on ratings of emotional reactions to the film and broad estimates of the danger, while Ball-Rokeach and her colleagues focused on measures of values, which tend to be stabler. The effect of The Day After on viewers' values is unclear. Another

possible explanation of the effects cannot be ruled out: the reactive effect of asking subjects on one occasion to rate their beliefs as they were before and after the film.

It is clear that popularized dramatizations of national issues like The Day After will continue to be made. Potentially they can play an important role in raising public awareness of threatening social problems. Psychologists need to research carefully and with more extensive designs the effect of these television films, both on viewers' beliefs and reactions and on their decision-making and action on the issue.

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Table 1

The Effects of Watching *The Day After*

Item	MS	df	F
Frequency of thinking about nuclear war	14.73	2	16.41*
Likelihood of nuclear war	10.06	2	10.23*
Likelihood of surviving nuclear war	8.46	2	15.45*
How much upset by thinking of nuclear war	10.04	2	7.90*
How much S can help prevent nuclear war	.73	2	.72 NS
U.S. policy decreasing/increasing threat	16.01	2	20.21*

*$p < .001$